

2019

Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide: Stakeholder Communications



CHILD CARE
State Capacity Building Center

Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide: Stakeholder Communications

State Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Administrators' key responsibilities include drawing attention to issues facing young children and families, communicating how specific policies and initiatives can lead to a stronger start for children, and showing how early learning is essential to later success in school and life. Engaging stakeholders, parents, state and local officials, and philanthropy and business leaders in conversation about the importance of high quality early childhood services, and the challenges of providing them, requires collaborative leadership and thoughtful, intentional planning to discern what children really need at home, school, and in the community to be successful. "Stakeholder Communications," chapter 5 of *Systems Building Resource Guide*, addresses the benefits of communicating and engaging with stakeholders, communication plans, making the most of stakeholder meetings, and relevant resources.

Technical Assistance in Systems Building for State Leaders

Technical assistance to support systems building, including strategic planning, is available through the State Capacity Building Center and may be available through other federal technical assistance centers. Please check with your State Systems Specialist for more information.

Benefits of Communicating and Engaging with Stakeholders

The earlier you engage stakeholders, the more likely you are to realize key benefits. Inform, consult, and involve partners so that you have better planned, informed, and accountable policies, projects, programs, and services. For CCDF Administrators, the benefits of engagement include improved information flows and policy and program results by tapping into local knowledge and having the opportunity to road test policy initiatives or proposals with stakeholders. Providing opportunities for input from a diverse group of stakeholders is essential to sound design and implementation of the early childhood system and to carrying out the state's leadership role in the work.

Providing ongoing and meaningful opportunities for communication and input allows stakeholders to contribute as experts in their field, have their issues heard, and contribute to the decision-making process. Good communication and engagement can also result in stakeholders and partners who are more encouraged to collaborate to build a system of supports that responds to the needs of young children and families.

Some benefits for all involved include a greater understanding of complex issues, raised awareness, and avoidance of possible misunderstandings.

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Selected Benefits for State Leaders of Proactive Stakeholder Communication and Engagement	Key Benefits for Stakeholders of Communication and Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creates higher quality decision-making ▪ Avoids duplication ▪ Increases efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery ▪ Supports sustainability planning ▪ Improves risk management practices, allowing risks to be identified and considered earlier, thereby reducing future costs ▪ Improves processes for systems building and policy development that consider knowledge, experience, and multiple perspectives ▪ Leverages stakeholder expertise and perspective ▪ Encourages greater sensitivity to policy and delivery design that meet community needs and ensure achievement of objectives ▪ Enhances community confidence in policies and initiatives undertaken ▪ Enhances capacity to innovate through transparent gathering of ideas and feedback ▪ Increases accountability for investment of public resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offers greater opportunities to contribute directly to systems development as well as policy and program development ▪ Leverages stakeholder expertise ▪ Makes lines of communication more open and transparent ▪ Increases accountability of CCDF Lead Agency ▪ Has potential to drive innovation ▪ Improves access to decision-making processes, resulting in the delivery of more efficient and responsive services ▪ Identifies synergies between stakeholder and CCDF work early on, encouraging integrated and comprehensive solutions to complex policy issues

See “[Chapter 2: Local Systems Building Through Coalitions](#)” in [Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book](#) for a fuller discussion of local systems development and its connection to state systems development. This chapter also examines the critical role that shared goals, ongoing communication, and feedback play in these efforts.

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Quick Tips for CCDF Administrators

These quick tips are divided into three groups: principles, engaging stakeholders, and messaging tips.

Core Principles to Inform Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

- Understand the current landscape, including the mindsets and attitudes of those you are seeking to inform, engage, or mobilize.
- Link to a common cause and belief, and create a shared vision and goals.
- Involve new voices and leaders from all sectors to expand the base of support.
- Set a direction for moving forward based on a realistic and manageable agenda that recognizes the role of compromise.
- Promote cultural and linguistic competency within the early childhood learning community.
- Provide factual, compelling information in usable forms for all stakeholders.

Practical Tips for Engaging Stakeholders

- Communicate what can actually change as a result of engagement and what will not change.
- Share with stakeholders whether they will be involved in the final decision-making or whether their engagement is for input only.
- Communicate expectations for the level of input required of stakeholders.
- Inform stakeholders early on about how the outcomes of the stakeholder engagement process will be communicated.
- Be open and honest about objectives and planned activities.
- Do not make promises that are not achievable.
- Be direct in addressing key concerns.

Messaging Tips

- Account for the perspectives of those who will be hearing your message when you develop it, and develop it with their perspectives in mind.
- Verify the accuracy of your message with colleagues, staff, and others in the state structure with an interest and valuable input (for example, agency communications officer, legislative liaison, or policy leader).
- Deliver clear, concise messages in a timely manner.
- Use plain language and minimize jargon.
- Share your key messages with colleagues who might be engaging with the same group of stakeholders to ensure that they are informed and that everyone in the state system remains consistently on message.
- Ensure the message is targeted to the relevant audience.
- Understand your target audience and the context in which they'll receive your messages.
- Consider multiple formats and opportunities to deliver messages, taking into account different adult learning styles and methods as well as cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity.
- Consider the languages used in your state and how to effectively deliver information and messages in these languages.

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Communication Plans

Exchanging important information and ideas in ways that are mutually beneficial and understood by the parties involved is a big part of effective communication and engagement. To raise awareness, inform, and guide stakeholders and key decision-makers in understanding, building, and supporting a sustainable comprehensive early childhood development system, CCDF Administrators must first develop a plan to communicate with stakeholders. Effective communication is well planned and sensitive to the needs of parents, providers, funders, key decision-makers, staff members, and other organizations that are interested in the systems building effort. One helpful way to hold oneself and others accountable for communication may be achieved through a written communication or engagement plan that is responsive to the needs of stakeholders who are part of your early childhood development systems building efforts.

The ability to communicate effectively and engage all stakeholders is an important part of the CCDF Administrator's job. Whether the collaborative group agrees to communicate formally or informally, a written communication plan or protocol to encourage open and frequent communication helps build mutual respect, understanding, and trust. The communication plan or protocol generally defines the key communicators; the timing and content of communication; and the means of sharing information among leaders, stakeholders, and the broader community. Communication plans and protocols also often address the following focus areas: individual communication styles, team building, decision-making, how to prevent and resolve conflict, when to use outside experts, meeting guidelines and ground rules, when to use broader media for public information and engagement, and how to identify key audiences, messages, and media. Knowledge about each of the communication focus areas and the ability to demonstrate them in relevant and appropriate contexts will help engage stakeholders and promote effective communication.

Planning Is Crucial

Do not underestimate the importance and the time it takes to define your purpose and what you want to achieve. This important step lays the critical foundation for the engagement process and is often overlooked, leading to problems later in the process.

To form an effective communications or engagement plan, consider using these guiding questions:

1. **Goal:** What is your goal? What is the purpose of the communication and engagement? What do you want to achieve at the end of the process (for example, outcomes such as seeking local knowledge or obtaining buy-in from stakeholders)? Are there tangible products you want to produce from the stakeholder engagement process (for example, outputs such as recommendations, research, or reports)?
2. **Stakeholders:** Who are the stakeholders? Did you consider all stakeholders who are necessary to achieve your goal?
3. **Level of engagement:** What level of engagement is required? Do you want to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower? What would the stakeholders consider to be appropriate engagement to achieve the goal?
4. **Proposed method of engagement:** What methods of engagement will you use, such as workshops, forums, webinars, or social media? How does the method of engagement relate to the level of engagement you are working to achieve and the overall goal? Do your methods of engagement take into account adult learning styles and principles? Do your methods of engagement account for the full diversity of the stakeholders, including cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity?

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5. **Timing:** What are the timing issues or requirements? Is this about establishing ongoing communications for developing the systems of engagement as a whole around a particular policy (for example, revisions to the state quality rating and improvement system or child care assistance program) or plan (for example, state strategic plan, CCDF Plan)?
6. **Resources:** What resources will you need to conduct the engagement process? Do you have the right people? Are they fully trained and supported for the engagement? Are consultants necessary for added support? Do you need resources for travel, meeting space, etc.? Are you able to engage the full range of stakeholders, taking into account the cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the state?
7. **Responsibility:** Who is responsible for designing and carrying out the plan? Have you clearly identified the various roles and responsibilities?
8. **Key messages to communicate:** What are the key messages? Have they been developed with the stakeholders in mind? Are the messages properly vetted with all necessary colleagues and staff within the state? Do you have the appropriate formats for delivering these key messages?
9. **Managing risk:** What are the risks associated with the engagement? How will they be addressed? Consider the seven C's to manage the risk factor. Make sure the communication is clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete, and courteous.

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Examples of State Communication Plans

Examples of communications plans developed by California, Connecticut, and New Hampshire are shared below.

California

First 5 California Strategic Plan includes a focus on communications as one of three critical areas. Within this area, which is about public will and investment, the plan seeks to build public engagement in, investment in, and support of the optimal wellbeing and development of children prenatal through age 5, their families, and communities through two goals, excerpted below:

- **Goal 3.1.** Communications | Build public will in investing in early childhood by communicating the potential for positive outcomes for children and families, and the importance of prevention and early intervention.
- **Goal 3.2.** Legislative Engagement and Leadership | Advocate for and influence policy change, both directly and in partnership with First 5 county commissions and other allies, from the local to federal levels that increase investments to improve conditions for children prenatal through age 5 and their families.¹

View the [California Plan](#).

Connecticut

In Connecticut's *Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan 2006–2008*, a communications and engagement strategy is one of six outcomes, excerpted below:

- Outcome 6. A broad-based communications and engagement strategy will develop public education and public will in support of early childhood services.
 - Goal 6.1. Develop broad-based support for comprehensive, integrated early childhood services for all children through expanded public awareness of the importance of the early childhood years.
 - Goal 6.2. Assure that different cultural communication styles and strategies are used to inform and engage the evolving diverse population.²

More recently, Connecticut created an integrated early childhood office with extensive legislation guiding its implementation. See “Sustaining Gains,” chapter 3 of *Systems Building Resource Guide*, for more information.

View the [Connecticut Plan](#).

New Hampshire

In *New Hampshire Comprehensive Early Childhood Strategic Plan 2013–2016*, communications is one of seven functional areas. In the communications and public awareness area, there are five activities that are excerpted below:

- Develop common messages: importance of early childhood “Bedrock” messaging.
- Develop communication plan to promote definition and importance of quality early childhood (EC) programs and services.
- Develop communication plan to promote the need for a sustainable, comprehensive system.
- Develop communication mechanisms within the early childhood system.
- Provide the public and early childhood workforce messages related to the importance of EC development, quality programs and practices, and a comprehensive EC system.³

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The plan also provides for several specific audiences, each with a specific outcome, excerpted below:

- Families: families will understand the importance of healthy early childhood development and will recognize and seek high quality prenatal and early childhood programs and services.
- Providers and professionals: providers will understand the importance of healthy early childhood development and will be able to consistently use the “Bedrock” messaging with families and the public.
- Local (program) administrators: local administrators will understand the importance of healthy early childhood development and will use the “Bedrock” messaging with the public and their employees who work with children and families to promote positive outcomes for children and families.
- Professional development and TA: professional development (PD) providers will understand and communicate the importance of healthy early childhood development and incorporate that knowledge into professional development and technical assistance curricula and materials.⁴

View the [New Hampshire Plan](#).

Making the Most of Stakeholder Meetings

Having a communications or engagement plan is an important step for being more connected with stakeholders and harnessing the brain trust of your state. However, by itself, it won’t deliver results. Meetings are fuel for collective action and impact. They are part of the day-to-day work of systems building, and they contribute to quality policy and program design and implementation. They help you and your partners continue to advance to your desired future and long-term goals. Managing partnerships and groups requires a great deal of communication through a variety of approaches. Although technology has enabled partners to communicate in a more regular and efficient manner, face-to-face meetings continue to play a valuable role in supporting the work.

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Results Based Facilitation

For meetings to be effective and meaningful, intentional planning with a focus on results is necessary. Jolie Bain Pillsbury's workbook, [Results Based Facilitation: Moving from Talk to Action](#), provides a set of competencies that give you the skills you need to make a measurable difference. The work of collective alignment, action, and impact occurs through the interaction of individuals in meetings that move from talk to action. To support the work of alignment in meetings, you should consider three working assumptions that inform which competencies are included in the results based facilitation (RBF) skillset, how those competencies are defined, and what the sequence is for learning and applying the competencies.⁵

- **The work of meetings occurs through conversations:** You can see any meeting as a series of conversations of differing length. Within longer conversations are smaller conversations, each with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. You and your partners want meetings with conversations that create both meaning and movement toward action and results. A partnership conversation is defined as people listening to and talking about the same thing at the same time in a way that, over time, leads to:
 - Understanding and relationship building
 - Problem solving and conflict resolution
 - Decision-making and commitment to accountable, aligned actions
- **A designated facilitator with the right skills is necessary:** Partnership conversations can be designed, prepared for, and flexibly supported by someone with a set of listening and speaking skills. Design, preparation, and interaction skills can be seen, named, practiced, and applied to all conversations. Each person in his or her role can practice these skills in conversations and can contribute to partner ownership of the purpose and moving to action. Learning and applying these skills starts with:
 - Awareness and choice about a role
 - Willingness to practice the skillset
- **Ensuring your facilitator can hold neutral in stakeholder engagement meetings:** A person holding a neutral role, using a set of listening and speaking skills to support the work of a partnership, can accelerate the work of that partnership. Holding neutral in any role occurs when a person gives the work back to the partnership and does not use his or her authority to pursue a personal agenda. Holding neutral in a facilitator role is aided when the partnership authorizes specific tasks in support of achieving the articulated purpose of the partnership within commonly understand boundaries of time and place.

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Key Considerations for Meeting Planning, Implementation, and Follow-Up

RBF is just one approach to developing and facilitating meetings that move you from talk to collective action and impact. Others are possible. Whatever approach is selected, meeting planning should involve attention to each of the following elements so that the meeting is planned to achieve success. Begin with the end in mind to help achieve a successful meeting for everyone involved.

Meeting Design, Location, and Notification

- Determine what will make the meeting successful and what the desired outcome is.
- Plan for the process and content needs and issues to achieve success, and design the meeting to meet those needs.
- Provide adequate notice of the meeting date.
- Provide advance copies of the agenda.
- Consider issues such as location, time of day, space, and environment.
- Provide participants with a roster and contact information so that they are aware of who has been invited.
- Consider the linguistic, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of the participants in planning the meeting, including its format and location.
- Consider adult learning and communication needs in designing the meeting, including its format, location, and room arrangement.

Agenda Development

- Identify the purpose and intent of the meeting and ensure that this is part of the agenda.
- Focus on how to achieve the desired results.
- Consider consulting with the meeting participants about agenda development to gain their input and perspectives.
- Create a working agenda to guide the meeting leadership with timelines, specific notes, supply needs, and so on.
- Create a public participant agenda for distribution before the meeting.
- Be intentional about the presentation and facilitation format and roles. Consider the balance of information, discussion, and decisional items, as well as the use of small and large groups, exercises, open discussion, and so on.
- Consider using lecture, information sharing, interaction and hands-on activities, and the adult learning styles of those involved, and keep in mind the linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of the participants.
- For all speakers, as well as the chair, ensure clarity about roles, timelines, and other critical issues prior to the start of the meeting.

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Evaluation

- Include opportunities for feedback in the agenda. This can be done by having an open conversation, providing a tool, or completing an exercise.
- Consider follow-up opportunities to gather feedback and evaluate the meeting process and content. Online surveys, as well as more personal interaction, may be used.

Meeting Follow-Up

- Let participants know if notes will be provided, and, if so, provide these in a timely manner.
- Identify follow-up steps, roles, responsibilities, and timelines, and communicate these during the meeting as well as during follow-up.

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Resources

Communication Planning

[“Effective Communication about the Early Years: Framing Early Childhood Issues”](#) (Zero to Three, 2006)

This series of articles is intended to help support infant/toddler professionals in their communication efforts. It includes articles on message framing, effective communication strategies, and storytelling.

[Elevating Quality Rating and Improvement System Communications: How to Improve Outreach to and Engagement with Providers, Parents, Policymakers, and the Public](#) (Child Trends, 2015)

The purpose of this report is to provide a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) communications framework and examples that can be used to support and improve communications with providers, parents, partners, policymakers, and the public. This report is intended for state QRIS program administrators, communications staff, and consultants; funders; partner organizations; and policymakers.

[Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide](#) (Advocacy and Communication Solutions, and Zero to Three, 2015)

This guide was created to help stakeholders talk about the importance of the earliest years of a child’s life and to make a stronger case for investment in infants and toddlers. Section 1 provides insight into national message trends for children from birth to 3 years of age. Section 2 offers guidance on how to develop effective infant/toddler messages.

[Public Education and Outreach](#) (Deborah Glik, and Elena Halpert-Schilt, 2001)

California’s county Proposition 10 commissions are charged with planning and designing a comprehensive, integrated strategic plan to carry out the California Children and Families Act of 1998. Their purpose is to achieve three strategic results: improved family functioning (strong families), improved child development (children learning and ready for school), and improved child health (healthy children). This paper provides background information on the basic development and production steps for a successful health communication campaign. Specifically, this paper describes the processes and possible outcomes that California’s Proposition 10 commissions can achieve by using techniques of strategic communications.

[Talking Early Child Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks Message Memo](#) (FrameWorks Institute, 2005)

This memo reports on the findings from FrameWorks’ research on how the public views early childhood issues in general and school readiness policies specifically. The goal of this research is to provide a foundation for understanding how the public thinks about school readiness, the implications of these thinking patterns, and what alternative frames might yield better public support for the kinds of policies child-focused organizations propose. It also examines whether frames currently in use by advocates, legislators, policy experts, and scientists advance a clear understanding of how children grow and develop, are sufficient to support a movement that must persist over time, and address a range of issues spanning health, education, housing, and economic policies.

[“Ten Tips for an Effective Communication Approach,” “Message Creation Checklist,” and “The Dirty Dozen of Strategic Communication”](#) (Advocacy and Communication Solutions, 2015)

These brief documents provide basic information and tips about communications planning and messaging that can help initiatives and programs begin thinking through their communications approach.

[The Communication Plan](#) (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network, 2014)

To build effective communication, state CCDF Administrators may want to establish informal and formal communication links and communicate openly and frequently with partners. This brief resource is intended to outline fundamental issues to consider when developing a communication plan.

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[Webinar Summary: Building Public Will as You Race to the Top](#) (Early Learning Challenge Technical Assistance, 2015)

This webinar summary provides an overview of strategies that states and localities can use to build public will to promote early childhood issues and initiatives. It defines public will, describes how to build it, and explains how to leverage existing public-private partnerships and relationships. The summary describes pitfalls, barriers, and challenges as well as demonstrated successes from other states.

Communication Skills and Styles

[“Common Decision Rules: Rationale, Typology, and Impacts”](#) (Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk, and Duane Berger, 2007, p. 268)

This tool is a part of the Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. It examines patterns of decision-making and explains the six most common rules of decision-making practice: unanimous agreement, majority vote, person in charge decides without discussion, “flip a coin,” delegation, and person in charge decides after discussion. It also provides implications and considerations for each decision rule.

[“Communications Skills”](#) (Mind Tools, n.d.)

This page provides many resources and tools to help individuals understand, assess, and build on their communications skills. It includes information on planning communication for maximum impact, influencing people effectively, and handling difficult communication situations.

[“Communications Style Inventory”](#) (Tony Alessandra, and Michael J. O’Connor, 1996)

This is an informal survey from *The Platinum Rule* that is designed to help people understand their communication style based on how they usually act in everyday situations. Participants score their answers and are told if they display the characteristics of each of four communication types: controller or director, promoter or socializer, supporter or relater, and analyzer or thinker.

[Conflict Response Styles](#) (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network, 2014)

Conflict resolution plans developed at the beginning of a partnership will be essential as partners work to solve difficult problems and move systems forward. This resource summarizes a classic model for framing conflict by five conflict response styles: completion, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation.

[“Facilitation Planning Checklist”](#) (Advocacy and Communication Solutions, 2015)

This checklist was designed to help a facilitator design, plan for, and prepare a facilitated session. It prompts the facilitator with questions to gather background information, including information on objectives and participants; helps the facilitator identify the best session flow; and ensures that the facilitator remembers materials and pre- and post-event details.

[Group Decision Making Styles](#) (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network, 2014)

This resource describes four common decision-making styles. One must consider decision-making style when developing communication strategies that are responsive to the needs of the people and organizations that are part of early childhood development systems building efforts. This resource is accompanied by a quiz designed to help readers further explore decision-making styles.

[Results Based Facilitation: Moving from Talk to Action](#) (Jolie Bain Pillsbury, 2013)

RBF is a competency-based approach to facilitating and participating in meetings to get results. The six RBF competencies used by participants and facilitators move groups from talk to action that produces results within programs, organizations, and communities. This is done by focusing on meeting results and by developing an accountability framework for commitments to aligned action. The central organizing concept of RBF is achievement of and accountability for results. This resource outlines the concept of RBF and introduces the competencies needed to carry out this approach.

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Stakeholder and Family Engagement

[Creating a Stakeholder Communications Plan](#) (Sport and Recreation New Zealand, n.d.)

This workbook provides an eight-step communications planning framework. It offers examples and prompts that aim to help readers think strategically to develop a pragmatic communications plan. The eight steps outlined in the workbook are setting communications objectives, setting key messages, defining and prioritizing key stakeholders, developing key messages for each stakeholder group, developing communications tactics for each stakeholder group, allocating budget and responsibilities, developing a communications calendar, and assessing results and adapting the plan.

[“Eight Steps to Successful Engagement”](#) (Advocacy and Communication Solutions, 2015)

This brief resource outlines eight steps to successful engagement: begin at the end, create a great introduction, do your homework, develop engagement strategies, write a script, engage, follow up and follow through, and track your progress.

[Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education](#) (Heather B. Weiss, Margaret Caspe, and M. Elena Lopez, 2006)

This research brief synthesizes the latest research that demonstrates how family involvement contributes to young children’s learning and development. The brief summarizes the latest evidence based on effective involvement—specifically, the research studies that link family involvement in early childhood to outcomes and programs that have been evaluated to show what works.

[“Gaining Buy-In from the Front Line During Times of Change”](#) (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, n.d.)

This brief draws from the experiences of the Children’s Bureau Systems of Care grant communities as they embarked on comprehensive systems and organizational change. It examines the critical role of frontline staff in carrying out change and outlines key steps and strategies for engaging them during times of change. This brief discusses strategies in the context of systems of care, but the lessons learned and tips offered can be applied more broadly to other child welfare agency reform efforts that reflect new ways of working with children and families.

[“The Case for Stakeholder Engagement”](#) (Kathleen P. Enright, and Courtney Bourns, 2010)

This article from the Stanford Social Innovation Review argues that the success of grantmaking initiatives often hinges on the degree to which funders engage grantees and other stakeholders in identifying problems and designing solutions. It outlines the benefits of engagement and describes examples of successful engagement efforts.

[“What Is Stakeholder Management?”](#) (Mind Tools, n.d.)

Stakeholder management is the process by which individuals or organizations identify key stakeholders and win their support. This module provides information on stakeholder analysis, or the process by which one identifies and starts to understand the most important stakeholders. It then provides resources for the next step in the process, stakeholder planning. Stakeholder planning is the process by which one plans how to manage stakeholders and gain their support for projects.

[“‘You Know How it Makes You Feel’: Low-Income Parents’ Childcare Priorities and Definitions of Ideal High-Quality Child Care”](#) (Nicole D. Forry, Shana Simkin, Edyth J. Wheeler, and Allison Bock, 2013)

Through focus groups and a written activity, this study explores and compares 41 low-income Maryland parents’ childcare priorities and definitions of ideal high-quality care. Features of ideal high-quality care identified by parents align with professional standards and with descriptions found in existing literature, though parents’ operationalized definitions of quality varied, and their expectations were lower than most professional standards. There was also strong alignment between identified features of high-quality care and parents’ priorities in their most recent childcare searches, though parents focused less on structured learning opportunities when discussing childcare priorities and more on practical features of care.

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

State Capacity Building Center,
A Service of the Office of Child Care

Address: 9300 Lee Highway, Fairfax, VA 22031

Phone: 877-296-2401

Email: CapacityBuildingCenter@ecetta.info

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